

AVIATION DELAYS AND CONSUMER ISSUES



Oral Statement of
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Air Transport Association of America, Inc. (ATA)
before the
Subcommittee on Aviation
of the
House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
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AIR TRANSPORT ASSOCIATION

Good morning, Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee.

Much has been said about lengthy flight delays. Some of it correct, much of it not. I'd like to spend a few moments this morning describing what has been done to better care for passengers caught up in these situations – not just by the airlines but also by airport operators, the Department of Transportation, the DOT Inspector General and the FAA. We have not been idle since the subcommittee's hearing last September.

PERFORMANCE DATA

We've all seen the recent performance data and the increase in passenger complaints, and we're not where we want to be. For that, we apologize to our customers. But we also want to assure them and members of this committee that we will keep doing everything we can to reduce the number of lengthy delays, and to make them as comfortable as possible during those delays. As you'll see from my remarks, all of the airlines have taken significant steps to ensure passengers' needs are addressed during lengthy flight delays – detailed contingency plans, improved cooperation and communication with airports, and improved, quicker responses when planes are sitting on the tarmac.

But the reality is that airlines can only do so much to reduce lengthy delays. Our efforts are met by a brick wall: the outdated ATC system that cannot handle today's traffic and cannot recover from severe weather that often effectively shuts down the system. That is why we fully support ATC modernization as quickly as possible – that's the real answer to the problem.

OVERVIEW

We've spent a lot of time and effort during the last year working on how the aviation community can better serve passengers during long delays. Because of that, we've come to understand that any useful discussion about this issue must recognize several basic considerations.

While this effort has been very helpful, we keep coming back to the indisputable conclusion that the nation's aging air traffic control system can't keep up with demand. Last summer's delays vividly – and unpleasantly – demonstrated that reality. One important implication of that ever-present reality is that the constrained ATC system impedes airline efforts to recover from flight delays. That's bad for us and for our customers.

The bedrock principle in the aviation business is safety first. It is that simple, no exceptions. Airlines will not put at risk their customers and employees. This means that an airline will not operate a flight if there is a concern that weather would jeopardize its safe operation.

Second, airlines have every incentive to operate their flights on time. Delays are disruptive and costly. Sitting on a taxiway burning Jet-A, which costs \$3.25 a gallon, is not a winning business proposition.

Third, weather is the cause of the vast majority of lengthy flight delays. There is only so much that can be done about the weather. We can avoid flying into bad weather but we can't make it go away. This means that we will continue to experience weather-related situations where the FAA restricts or prohibits flying. We also need to acknowledge that, despite the remarkable improvements in weather forecasting, there are times when we are surprised by the extent and duration of severe weather.

Fourth, airline operations and the air traffic control system that airlines depend on are very complex. They are complicated, interdependent networks. Recovering from interruptions in such an intricate, high-volume operating environment – which is what flight delay management is all about – can be very difficult and can take time.

Fifth, airlines understand what they need to do and – as I will discuss in a moment – have implemented measures to respond more effectively to lengthy delays. What they need is the flexibility to do so. Each airline's operations differ – reflecting the varying needs and expectations of the customers they serve – as do the circumstances surrounding each delay. Consequently, rigid edicts from Washington – or worse yet, a slew of divergent laws from state capitals – will not produce the responsiveness that customers want and deserve. What they will produce are unintended and undesirable consequences for the customer.

WHAT WE HAVE DONE

- ATA members have reviewed and revised their extended-ground-delay contingency plans. As a result, they have:
 - Implemented procedures for closer airline operations center monitoring of delayed flights
 - Established time-based decision points for delayed flights
 - Involved more senior management in decision making about delayed flights
 - Reemphasized to their employees the importance of informing passengers of flight status
 - And in doing so, have continued the expansion of electronic and voice text messaging to customers, to inform them about their flight's status
 - Reviewed their systemwide flight delay mitigation programs
 - Reviewed their flight cancellation policies, which can involve “pre-cancelling” – the early cancellation – of flights to enable airlines to have their aircraft and crews better positioned to resume normal operations the next day
 - Reviewed resources at likely diversion airports to enable those airports to better accommodate diverted flights
- Coordinated with airport operators to improve delay response programs
 - Identified gate, mobile air stairs and bus resources to facilitate deplaning of passengers
 - Reviewed terminal resources to accommodate affected passengers

- Coordinated with the FAA about air traffic control procedures for extended delays
 - With the FAA and airport operators, we've reviewed the use of taxiways and ramps during extended ground delays
 - We've also reviewed airspace procedures with the FAA to better accommodate flight operations during period of adverse weather
- Participated in DOT's New York Aviation Rulemaking Committee
 - Urged accelerated implementation of the FAA's New Jersey-Newark-Philadelphia airspace redesign plan
- Provided contingency plans to DOT Inspector General for his review
 - ATA requested the IG's involvement after the early 2007 delay incidents
- Participated in DOT rulemaking proceedings aimed at enhancing passenger protections during long ground delays, and improving the reporting of such delays
 - ATA recommended specific changes to DOT proposal, to fill in gaps so that delay and cancellation data are captured.
- Briefed members of Congress on the airlines' revised delay-mitigation measures
- Enhanced their Web sites to describe extended ground-delay measures

WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

We've learned some important lessons in the last year, particularly as a result of recent delay experiences.

Our revised plans are not static. We realize that we must adopt a lessons learned approach. Even with the most detailed plans, effectively responding to lengthy delays is an iterative process. Equally important, recent experience confirms the importance of flexibility. An example of this is American Airline's decision last month to use buses to return passengers to DFW from a nearby Texas airport rather than waiting for rescheduled flights.

We've also learned that there is an unavoidable trade-off between trying to work through delayed flights and cancelling flights to avoid those delays. This is important to recognize because one very clear message from our customers is that most would prefer a delayed flight to a cancelled flight. That's not surprising. But the message sometimes is forgotten when we discuss the issue of delayed flights. To be crystal clear about this point: If Congress and the public conclude that avoiding lengthy delays is the most important objective, we must all accept the fact that more flights will be cancelled and more passengers, at the end of the day, will be inconvenienced.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE

As I mentioned a few moments ago, we cannot control the weather. But we can use technology to improve our ability to operate during inclement weather and, equally important, to recover from interrupted operations. That means leveraging existing ATC resources as best we can. It also means, however, aggressively pursuing NextGen, the satellite-based air navigation and communications system that all in the aviation community recognize is indispensable to meeting the future needs of the flying and shipping public.

Working together, we have made real progress in meeting the needs of passengers during extended delays. We realize that we need to continue to improve our response in such situations. We, along with our colleagues in the airport community and at the FAA and DOT, are committed to that.

Thank you.